



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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Grand Canyon News Release

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Grand Canyon National Park Helitack and Search and Rescue Crew Members Receive Igor I. Sikorsky Humanitarian Service Award

Grand Canyon, AZ. – On Monday, February 23, at the Helicopter Association International Heli-Expo Awards Banquet, “Salute to Excellence”, members of Grand Canyon National Park’s helitack and search and rescue crews received the Igor I. Sikorsky Award for Humanitarian Service in recognition of their efforts during the short-haul rescue of sixteen stranded boaters on August 17, 2008.



The image everyone remembers. Helitack crew members wait to receive two members of a stranded rafting party being lowered to shore by helicopter.

NPS photo from video by Brandon Torres.

In August of last year, Havasu Canyon, a popular side canyon of the Grand Canyon, flash flooded as a result of heavy, localized, monsoon rains. The flood waters necessitated the evacuation of almost 400 people from Havasu Canyon and the Village of Supai (located approximately 75 air miles west of Grand Canyon Village), and washed the boats of a private rafting party that had gone ashore downstream. A Grand Canyon National Park search and rescue team found the party of sixteen rafters and guides

stranded on a ledge more than 30 feet above the floodwaters at the confluence of Havasu Creek and the Colorado River. The rescue team, consisting of a Papillon Grand Canyon Helicopters

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pilot, five members of Grand Canyon National Park's helitack crew and a park ranger/paramedic, used a short-haul rescue technique to move group members, two at a time, from the ledge to the shore of the Colorado River where they could get into the helicopter and be flown to Hualapai Hilltop for transport by bus to a Red Cross shelter in Peach Springs, Arizona.

The Igor I. Sikorsky Award for Humanitarian Service is sponsored each year by Sikorsky Aircraft in honor of its founder, and is presented to the person(s) who best demonstrates the value of civil rotorcraft to society by saving lives, protecting property, and aiding those in distress.

According to the program for the 2009 "Salute to Excellence", the evacuation required,

"precision flying under difficult conditions due to the tight canyon and the need to hover for prolonged periods in close proximity to the canyon wall." According to Jay Lusher, Grand Canyon National Park's helicopter program manager, the need to work and land right next to rushing water only increased the challenges as the movement of the water can prove disorienting to pilot and crew.



Papillon Helicopter's MD 900 on contract to Grand Canyon National Park sitting on the stone shore that stranded rafters were transported to via short-haul.
NPS photo from video by Brandon Torres

Seven individuals were honored for their efforts during the rescue, Helicopter Program Manager Jay Lusher, Helitack Squad Leader John Yurcik, seasonal Helitack Crew Member Sean Naylor, seasonal Helitack/Paramedic Nate Becker, seasonal Helitack Ali Ulwelling, Ranger/Paramedic Brandon Torres, and Helicopter Pilot Bryce Barnett of Papillon Grand Canyon Helicopters. But according to Lusher, "it just says Grand Canyon Helitack on the award, but to us it includes our vendor (Papillon), ...all the people who work for them and all the people who work for the National Park Service. ...we see ourselves as one giant crew that works together to accomplish all the missions we have."

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Other nominees considered for the 2009 award included the Orange County Fire Authority Air Operations, STARS Aviation Canada, Inc., and the Manaus Squadron of the Brazilian Air Force. Previous winners of the award include aircraft involved in Hurricane Andrew and Hurricane Katrina air operations, the Government Flying Service of Hong Kong, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Turkish Armed Forces/Red Star Helicopter Association, the South African Air Force Rescue Crew and Soviet Union aircrews involved in relief efforts following the Chernobyl nuclear power station accident.

According to Interagency Unit Aviation Officer Michael Ebersole, “this is the most prestigious award received in the 36-plus year history of Grand Canyon National Park’s aviation program...”. Congratulations Grand Canyon helitack and search and rescue crews and Papillon Grand Canyon Helicopters on a job extraordinarily well done.

To see the video footage of the rescue that the above images were taken from, please go to www.nps.gov/grca/parknews/short-haul.htm. To learn more about the park’s helicopter program, contact Helicopter Program Manager Jay Lusher at 928-638-7921; and to learn more about the park’s search and rescue program, contact Ken Phillips at 928-638-7792.



Helitack Squad Leader John Yurcik, Helicopter Pilot Bryce Barnett, Helicopter Program Manager Jay Lusher and seasonal Helitack Crew Member Sean Naylor were on hand to accept the Igor I. Sikorsky Award for Humanitarian Service on behalf of Grand Canyon National Park and Papillon Grand Canyon Helicopters.
NPS photo by Michael Ebersole

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